"In the past several decades, the international community has relied on three approaches to deal with countries that descend into chaos. It has supported strongmen capable of reimposing order by force; it has given up in despair, leaving the country to sort out its problems as best it can; and, most recently, it has embarked on ambitious projects to reconstruct the country in the image of a modern secular, multiethnic, and democratic state. None of these approaches should be used in Afghanistan."

Rebuilding Afghanistan

MARINA OTTAWAY AND ANATOL LIEVEN

Afghanistan after the Taliban may easily turn into a quagmire for the international community, and the wrong kind of international strategies may easily worsen both its problems and America's. In particular, to begin with a grossly overambitious program of reconstruction risks acute disillusionment, international withdrawal, and a plunge into a new cycle of civil war and religious fanaticism.

CONFRONTING TERRORISM

Ambitious plans to turn this war-hardened, economically ravaged, deeply divided country into a modern democratic state are being proposed and have even been incorporated into the December 5, 2001 Bonn agreement among Afghan leaders. But nobody is proposing the full-fledged, long-term military occupation that would be required even to attempt such a transformation—one reason being that past occupations, whether British or Soviet, have ended in utter disaster. At most, the international community is speaking of a relatively lightly armed presence in Kabul and certain other centers.

The chances of successfully imposing effective modern democratic state structures on Afghanistan thus are negligible. Even with a massive Western military presence on the ground, the West has already run into serious problems in transforming tiny Bosnia. Afghanistan is a country 12 times the size of Bosnia with 26 million people; an extremely difficult terrain; an ethnically, tribally, and religiously segmented society; and a fearsome array of battle-hardened warlords who have no good reason to give up their power.

But the world cannot afford to turn its back on Afghanistan in frustration, as it has done in the past, lest the country again become a haven for terrorists and an international threat. Afghanistan needs a modest reconstruction program that does not require full-fledged military occupation and is tailored to the reality of the country.

A CENTURY OF TROUBLED STATE BUILDING

The Afghan state is a recent, partly colonial creation that has never commanded the full loyalty of its own citizens. Even today, many—perhaps most—Afghans give their primary allegiance to local leaders, ethnic groups, and tribes.

Afghanistan was only created at the end of the nineteenth century. All of its borders were determined by the British Empire, and reflected not an internal historical or ethnic logic, but an imperial one. Its northern border marked the furthest extent to which Britain was prepared to see the Russian empire advance. Its southern and eastern borders were the furthest limit to which the British Indian Empire felt it necessary and safe to extend itself. Within these borders an Afghan state with modern trappings was created by a confluence of British geopolitical interest and the ruthless government of King Abdur Rahman, the so-called Iron Amir, who reigned from 1880 to 1901. The king was a highly competent ruler who, by quite fiendish methods and with massive subsidies of money and weapons from the British, created the basis—albeit limited—for a centralized Afghan state.

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Abdur Rahman's reign marked the start of the Afghan state-building process. In Europe, this process began in the early Middle Ages, stretched over several centuries with numerous catastrophic setbacks, and was attended by immense cruelty, resistance, and devastation. It therefore is hardly surprising that the very short Afghan state-building process met fierce resistance, had limited success, and ultimately collapsed—especially given the intensely warlike, independent, and anarchic traditions of many Afghan peoples, including the largest ethnos, the Pashtuns.

Abdur Rahman laid the foundations not only for the centralizing and modernizing Afghan state, but also for the alienation from that state of the religious, tribal, and ethnic groups that dominate Afghan society. This alienation helped bring about the failure of the Afghan constitutional monarchy in the 1960s and early 1970s and tore the country apart in the following decades.

Had the modern Afghan state succeeded in developing Afghanistan and bringing visible benefits to the mass of the population, hostility to the state would gradually have faded. But, as with state building in so much of the world, it failed to do so, and its one area of partial success helped seal its own fate. The modern education system, although limited to a small fraction of the population (and of course an even smaller proportion of women), created a mass of educated graduates and junior bureaucrats and military officers for whom no well-paying jobs could be found either in the impoverished private sector or state service. Their bitter frustration produced the communist revolution of 1978, which essentially was an attempt to relaunch the state's modernizing program in an ultraradical guise by returning to Abdur Rahman's savage methods.

The communists' program, like that of Abdur Rahman, depended critically on subsidies and weapons from an outside protector, in this case the Soviet Union. And as in the Iron Amir's time, this foreign support helped spark fierce resistance from a variety of religious, ethnic, and tribal groups. The resistance eventually triumphed, and between 1978 and 1992 it overthrew the communist regime and eventually the Afghan state itself, first in the mountains, then across most of the country, and finally in Kabul and the other main cities. Tragically, but not surprisingly, the resistance proved completely incapable of replacing this state with any unified authority of its own, except—after a period of violent chaos—in the pathological and temporary form of the Taliban.

The difficulty of creating an Afghan state based on anything but sheer coercion has been immensely complicated by the region's ethnic makeup. The original "state-forming" ethnic group, the Pashtuns, make up less than half the total population, with the rest divided among a wide range of different nationalities. Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras (Shias of Mongolian descent) are the largest groups and are mentioned most often, but several smaller ones play key roles in their own areas.

Equally important, the Pashtuns' own role in the history of the modern Afghan state has been profoundly ambiguous. Afghanistan is a Pashtun creation, achieved through a Pashtun dynasty, and to this day the Pashtuns constitute the core of the country. But Pashtun tribal society is highly segmented and thus radically unfit to serve as the basis for the formation of a unitary state. Pashtun and other tribal revolts against the state's modernizing policies, often led by local religious figures, plagued all Afghan rulers. They played a central part in the rebellion against communist rule, and in the general reaction against Western modernity and modern state institutions that followed.

THE CHOICES

In the past several decades, the international community has relied on three approaches to deal with countries that descend into chaos. It has supported strongmen capable of reimposing order by force; it has given up in despair, leaving the country to sort out its problems as best it can; and, most recently, it has embarked on ambitious projects to reconstruct the country in the image of a modern secular, multiethnic, and democratic state. None of these approaches should be used in Afghanistan, but something can be learned from each of them.

A compromise approach needs to be based on an awareness both of Afghanistan's past and its present conditions, not on an image of the modern state the West would like it to become. The international community must recognize that in the northern half of the country, the coherence of the Northern Alliance is unlikely to last for long without its raison d'être of resistance to the Taliban, whereas in the Pashtun areas confusion reigns. In short, it will be extremely difficult to create any unifying political structures.

Heavily armed tribal groups will not surrender their arms or their local power unless they are forced to do so by a national government with a powerful army of its own or by an overwhelming outside force. Because the international community is not prepared to produce an occupying force on the same

scale as that deployed in Bosnia and Kosovo—thus, many times larger in absolute terms—the democratic-reconstruction model cannot be implemented. Indeed, it would almost certainly fail even if such a force were deployed. The strategy therefore needs to be less invasive.

The now-discredited strongman model is historically the favored method to stabilize a country in crisis; it was freely employed, for instance, by the United States during the cold war and by France as part of its neocolonial strategy in Africa. It is not ethically appealing, but it is cheap, can be effective for a time, and requires little effort on the part of international actors, who delegate the job of imposing order to local leaders. There is no conceivable strongman or strong organization for Afghanistan as a whole. There are, however, strongmen controlling different regions. They will remain part of the political scene, and the international community has no choice but to work with them as it has worked with other such leaders in the past.

The international community must initially accept some version of ordered anarchy in Afghanistan and work to attenuate its worst shortcomings.

Today's orthodox approach to restoring states is much more democratic, but also much more invasive and costly, yet not particularly successful. For the past 10 years, the explicit goal of the international community has been to transform countries in crisis into democratic states with a free market economy based on the argument that only such states benefit their citizens and safeguard the international need for stability in the long run. This Western-dominated sociopolitical engineering approach is becoming ever more complex and costly as experience reveals new areas where intervention is needed.

The components of the democratic-reconstruction model can be summarized as follows: the parties involved in the conflict must reach agreement on a new permanent political system. Elections must be held as soon as possible. The new state must be multiethnic, secular, and democratic—regardless of whether this has any basis in local tradition, or whether it is what the inhabitants of the country want. While the accord is being implemented, peace and order are guaranteed by an international force, as well as by the presence of a large number of UN administrators. The international financial institutions take on the restructuring of the country's economy. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are funded to work in their specialized areas, ranging from humanitarian aid to election organizing.

Elements of the democratic-reconstruction model are already beginning to show up in the discussions of what to do in Afghanistan. The agreement reached by the Afghan factions in Bonn provides for the formation in six months of a broadly based interim government giving representation to all ethnic groups and to women, followed by elections two years later. Virtually all international organizations and NGOs demand strong action to promote women's rights. The World Bank's Afghanistan "Approach Paper" calls for helping the country to build a strong central bank and ministry of finance and for capacity building in all economic institutions. Other organizations target the strengthening of civil society. And this is only the beginning.

Not only is most of this impossible in Afghanistan today, but much of it fits only the wishes of a small minority of Westernized urban Afghans, many of whom have spent the past generation living in the West and are out of touch with their own society. They also, consciously or unconsciously, have a vested interest in Western strategies that would guarantee maximum employment and status for themselves. The model would need to be imposed on reluctant tribal leaders and warlords, on religious authorities, and probably on most ordinary Afghans, and would thus require a strong foreign military and civilian presence, projecting to the world the image of a Muslim country under foreign occupation. As in Somalia, the outcome would almost certainly be conflict between the international force and powerful local groups.

This conflict would most likely lead sooner or later to a swing in exactly the opposite direction, toward withdrawal and neglect, as happened in Somalia and in Afghanistan a decade ago. The reason was the same in both cases: the countries concerned did not appear sufficiently important to justify the effort to create order. The consequences of neglect were serious. Afghanistan became a haven for Al Qaeda. Somalia spawned not only harmless homegrown and clan-based Islamist groups but also al-Itihaad al-Islamiya, an organization aligned with Al Qaeda whose operatives were involved in the 1998 attacks on the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

In Somalia, however, neglect also had some positive consequences, and this lesson must be heeded in designing a strategy for Afghanistan. With no center to be held, and no pot of foreign aid to be

fought over, fighting in Somalia was greatly reduced and mechanisms were developed to compensate for the absence of the state. This did not necessarily mean reverting to a completely primitive life within villages and clans. A new class of international traders emerged, for example, who are capable of financing complex transactions, making international payments, and developing markets.

The Somali experience has historical precedents. The "ordered anarchy" of medieval France, Germany, or Italy—characterized by multiple overlapping armed authorities—did not preclude the establishment of great and stable long-range trade routes and commercial and financial networks, major economic growth, and tremendous achievements in human culture. In the long run, these also laid the foundations for the growth of a modern judicial order, which in turn was an essential basis for the economic revolution and the modern state. The international community must initially accept some version of ordered anarchy in Afghanistan and work to attenuate its worst shortcomings.

THE RIGHT CHOICE

The international community's immediate aim for the Afghan government should therefore not be the impossible fantasy of a democratic government technocratically administering the country, but rather the formation of a loose national mediation committee functioning not just for the initial six months but indefinitely. This committee should seek not to create the entire apparatus of a modern state, but rather the minimal conditions for medieval civilization: the avoidance of major armed conflict, the security of main trade routes, and the safety and neutrality of the capital. These conditions should be secured not by an Afghan national army—another empty fantasy, given the present situation—but by an international force created by the United Nations and backed by the ultimate sanction of American airpower. An agreement on how to create such minimal conditions would be a greater accomplishment for the *loya jirga* called for by the Bonn agreement than would approval of a Western-style democratic constitution that could never be implemented.

Most Western aid therefore should not be directed through the Afghan government—even assuming that the appearance of a broadly based national government could be sustained—but should be provided directly to Afghanistan's regions. Aid should, moreover, be used in a quite clear-headed and tough way as an instrument of peacekeeping—as a way to give local warlords and armies an incentive not to go to war with each other. It would be a bribe of sorts, and might appear to perpetuate the power of warlords. But as Somalia and other African examples illustrate, greater risks would be involved in making the central government the chief channel for international aid, since this would make control of the government and the city of Kabul a vital goal for the country's various armed forces. Aid itself would become a source of future conflict.

Aid should also be provided directly at the local level, of course, to villages and local organizations. But the international community should have no illusion that it is possible to completely bypass warlords and tribal leaders in this fashion. In the end, as the experiences of aid agencies in many countries show, armed groups and powerful individuals always influence how aid is used in their areas.

The international strategy toward Afghanistan should therefore be based on these key principles:

- Discard the assessments of what help Afghanistan needs to become a modern democratic state and replace them with a sober evaluation of the minimal tasks a central administration needs to perform to allow a measure of normal life, economic activity, and, above all, trade.
- Work directly with regional leaders whose power is well established. Assign liaison officials to work with these leaders, monitor their behavior (especially their treatment of local ethnic minorities and their relations with other regions and ethnic groups), and make sure that they provide no shelter to terrorist groups.
- Instruct these liaison officials to work with international and domestic NGOs to ensure not only that they can work unhindered, but also that they do not become dangerously entangled in local politics.
- Create a corps of international civil servants to act as these liaison officials and otherwise assist Afghanistan. These officials should be paid generously in return for devoting a substantial term of service to this difficult and dangerous task and for investing in learning local languages, history, and customs; everything possible should be done to establish their position and prestige. A certain historical precedent here is provided by the British Empire's Indian Political Service, which managed—but, wisely, never tried to administer—the Pashtun tribal areas and handled relations with the Afghan monarchy.
- Give serious consideration to the standards that need to be met by local leaders in exchange for aid.

Resist the temptation to impose unrealistic standards. Pick only a few battles to fight at one time. For example, make aid initially contingent on education for girls, but not on a comprehensive reform of legal or social codes governing the position of women in the family or major participation of women in administration. Incremental change is more likely to be sustainable.

•Accept that, even with checks and conditions, there will be corruption, and aid will help warlords consolidate their power and their client networks. Experience shows that corruption is inevitable whenever a country receives large amounts of aid, even if it is channeled through formal government institutions. Use aid quite consciously as a political tool to maintain peace.

•Establish certain basic national institutions in Kabul, but leave the question of a real national administration for Afghanistan for the distant future. Instead, treat the central government as a form of national mediation committee. Avoid making Kabul and the central government prizes worth fighting over.

•Create a substantial United Nations–mandated international force to ensure the security and neutrality of the city of Kabul as a place where representatives from different areas can meet and negotiate, and where basic national institutions can be created. Be prepared to maintain this force for a period of several years, at least.

•Do not pursue democratic measures, such as organizing elections, that would increase competition at the center among different warlords or ethnoreligious groups: in present circumstances such elections could not possibly lead to stable democratic institutions.

WHAT IS NEEDED

The United States and the international community do not need Afghanistan to become a modern democratic state—even a united one—to protect their key interests. They require a cessation of serious armed conflict and sufficient access to all parts of the country to ensure that it will not again become a haven for international terrorist groups and a source of destabilization for its neighbors. Beyond this, America's interests and capabilities are highly limited.

If Afghanistan could be turned by fiat into a Scandinavian welfare state, well run and capable of

delivering services to its population, its people surely would benefit greatly. But the international community cannot deliver such a state. At best, experience shows it can deliver institutions that conform to the appearance of the modern state, but that function inefficiently and corruptly and that generate new conflicts over control.

What the people of Afghanistan need most urgently, and the international community can help them obtain, is the cessation of war and the possibility of pursuing basic economic activities free from brutal oppression, ethnic harassment, and armed conflict. They need to be able to cultivate their fields, sell their products, go to market, send their children to school, receive basic medical care, and move freely around the country. In the long run, much more would be desirable, but the first step should simply be to reestablish a degree of normal life, even if it is not life in a modern state. Just to achieve this much will require many years of careful, concentrated effort by dedicated international workers on the ground. More ambitious state-building plans must be left for another generation, and to the Afghans themselves. ■